

Race, Politics, and the Gospel – Slavery and the Bible

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Introduction

- James Smith – slave and brother
 - *[18] Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. [19] For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. [20] For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. [21] For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.* (1 Peter 2:18-21)

- Christian slave owners?

Does the Bible Support Slavery?

- Slavery in Scripture
 - The difficulty of translation
 - *A particular difficulty is presented when words in biblical Hebrew and Greek refer to ancient practices and institutions that do not correspond directly to those in the modern world. Such is the case in the translation of 'ebed (Hebrew) and doulos (Greek), terms which are often rendered "slave." These terms, however, actually cover a range of relationships that require a range of renderings—either "slave," "bondservant," or "servant"—depending on the context.* (ESV Preface)
 - *Further, the word "slave" currently carries associations with the often brutal and dehumanizing institution of slavery in nineteenth-century America.* (ESV Preface)
 - Slavery in the Old Testament
 - Foreign Slaves
 - Deuteronomy 20:10-11; Joshua 9; Leviticus 25:44-46
 - Hebrew Slaves
 - Exodus 21:1-11; Leviticus 25:39-55; Deuteronomy 15:12-18
 - *I have some reservations about describing this relationship as slavery, because Leviticus 25:39-40 says that in this relationship the master shall not make him serve as a slave; "he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner."* (John Frame)
 - *[12] If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. [13] And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. [14] You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.* (Deuteronomy 15:12-14)

- Slavery in the New Testament
 - 30-40% of the Grecco Roman population were slaves.

- **Biblical Regulation Does Not Equal Support**

- *[3] And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [4] He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, [5] and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? [6] So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." [7] They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" [8] He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. [9] And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (Matthew 19:3-9)*

- **Regulation Toward Humaneness**

Conditions of slaves in different systems

	Old Testament	Roman	New World
Holiday	Yes	No	Yes
Enough food	Yes	No	No
Legal redress	Yes	No	No
Sexual protection	Yes	No	No
Kidnapped	No	Yes	Yes
Chains	No	Yes	Yes
Torture	No	Yes	Yes
Physical abuse	No	Yes	Yes

- *The experience [of slavery in Egypt] coloured their subsequent attitude to slavery enormously. On the one hand, Israelites were not supposed to subject one another to slave status or conditions of labour. Such action was incompatible with the equality of being redeemed brothers, slaves of the LORD alone. On the other hand, their treatment of aliens within their own society, whether those aliens were technically free but landless 'tenant' workers, or actual bought slaves, was to be marked with compassion born of the memory of Egypt, where they themselves had been denied mercy. (Christopher Wright)*
- *Slavery in relatively small societies like Israel was qualitatively vastly different from slavery in the large imperial civilizations – the contemporary ancient Near Eastern empires, and especially the later empires of the Greeks and Romans.... And, of course, Israelite slavery was even more different from the ghastly commercialized and massive-scale slave trades that Arabs, Europeans,*

and Americans perpetrated upon Africa. We must put out of our mind pictures such as the Roman galley ships of Ben Hur, or the neck-irons, slave-ships, and sugar plantations of modern black slavery when we read the word 'slave' in the Old Testament.... Provided they were humanely treated (as the law required), such slavery could be said to be little different experientially from many kinds of paid employment in a cash economy. And the evidence shows... that slaves in Israel had more legal rights and protection than in any contemporary society. (Christopher Wright)

- [26] "When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. [27] If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth. (Exodus 21:26-27)
- [15] "You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. [16] He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him. (Deuteronomy 23:15-16)

- **Equality under God**

- [13] "If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, [14] what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? [15] Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb? (Job 31:13-15)
- [1] Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. (Colossians 4:1)
- [9] Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (Ephesians 6:9)
- Masters are to serve their slaves. They are not even to threaten them! These commands of Paul undermine the whole institution of slavery. Slavery without threats is scarcely slavery. One characteristic that distinguishes slavery from other forms of employment is the right of the master to beat the slave, and it is the constant threat of beating that supports the relationship. Servant leadership, applied to the institution of slavery, virtually reverses the roles of master and slave. (John Frame)

- **Family in Christ**

- [7] For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. (Philemon 7)
- [15] For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, [16] no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Philemon 15-16)

- **Why Not an Explicit Condemnation?**

- Biblical slavery typically had an end date.
 - Slaves [in the New Testament] would work for several years and would eventually earn their freedom. Therefore, the total abolition of slavery was not an urgent burden on the

hearts of the first-century Christians, partly, it seems, because of the way the system worked. (Benjamin Reaoch)

- Christians did not have a way of addressing slavery as an institution.
 - *[21] Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)* (1 Corinthians 7:21)
 - *Lex Fufia Caninia* (2 BC) – only free 2 of 3; half of 4-10; a third of 11-30.
 - *Lex Aelia Sentia* (4 AD) – slaves under 30 cannot be freed without legal procedure
- The Bible primarily aims at transforming individuals.
 - *If Christianity is viewed as basically a movement of social reform, then this silence regarding slavery is indeed surprising, if not culpable. But Christianity in its essence is concerned with the transformation of character and conduct rather than with the reformation of societal structures.... The principal change sought is in the individual, and the secondary in society, through transformed individuals.* (Murray Harris)

How Do We Reckon with Christians Who Owned Slaves?

- **Examine Yourself**
 - *[21] "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' [23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"* (Matthew 7:21-23)
 - *[5] Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (2 Corinthians 13:5)*
- **God Can Draw Straight Lines with Crooked Sticks**
 - *I am not calling for moral relativism, but for moral reasoning. There is a difference between the flawed man who accomplished great things and stood for a heroic cause and the flawed man who accomplished dubious things and stood for a sinful cause. Past, present, or future, no one wants to be defined solely by his or her failings. Dealing with our fellow image bearers as whole people—with honesty, sympathy, and charity—won't eliminate racial tensions, but we might be able to bridge some of the divide that separates us.* (Kevin DeYoung)
- **Be Aware of Cultural Blind Spots**
- **Thank God for His Grace**